



Personal experience in China

Engineering practice within Chinese
and Swiss culture 2019



Preamble

When you start reading the recommended books, you expect one, two or maybe three stories per book, which are somehow related so that the protagonists finally meet somewhere or influence each other. In advance I also expected to read some stories which include stereotypes or typical behaviour. It took me a few chapters of "factory girls" to realize that I was reading a dozen stories and more and I felt that I could never find out what was important and typical in these books. There were stories which told, that it was very important for young women to find good friends to survive in the factories and on the other hand there were people, who were telling that there were no "real friends" in factories. For me, everything seemed to be contradictory. This made me think of a lecture about intercultural management, which mentioned that "The test of a first-rate intelligence is to hold two opposed ideas in your mind at the same time still retain your capacity to function. You must, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and still be determined to make them otherwise".

So, I tried to imagine that China could be both, open and closed, Chinese people could be both, individualists and communitarians, that Chinese communication could be both, abstract and concrete even though there are tendencies.

It is almost impossible to sum up the visit in China, since there are still so much open questions, even more than at the beginning. But it is possible to give some hints and impressions. You can find examples or comparisons for almost everything if you are open-minded. Due to its size, history and its fast-developing China keeps a variety of people, cultural behaviour, religions, landscape and so on, that I could not imagine it. For example, since China developed later but way faster than the average European country, you can find generational differences, which are no more visible in Switzerland. Even though our parents had no smartphone or computers when they were children, they experienced cars, television and cinema when they were very young. In China some people did not experience these things 20 years ago, because these things were not available for them and now these people live in a very developed city and work with high technology without having changed their place of residence.

Even though we saw just a very small part of China, we travelled through a state, which seemed to include different countries in different epochs at the same time - like travelling with a time machine.

Introduction

My personal report is divided in short stories, which contain personal experience, knowledge from books and seminars, comparisons between expectations and reality, personal learnings and hints. As there is a development of my thinking during these events, I decided to leave the stories separated and added the dates on which the stories happened. This shift in mindset is not easily to spot in these short stories, but if one changes the order of the stories it becomes obvious at some point that it doesn't fit anymore.

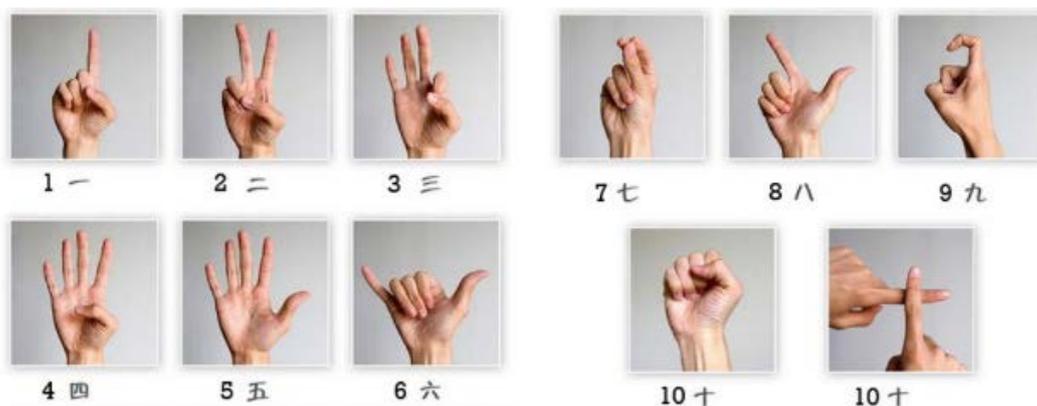
Since the following stories are quite personal, the word "we" will be used sometimes. "We" in this context means western people, but may of course not stand for every single person and eventually it doesn't even stand for the majority.

Personal Recommendation

(09.07.2019 Seminar Chinese Language)

What I would definitely recommend is to get engaged with language, gestures and behaviour in advances. We do not just speak another language than the chinese people, we use other fingers to count, e.g. chinese people figured out to count to 10 with their fingers just using one hand. We also use other signs e.g the gesture for showing that we are sorry and since gestures are the second way to communicate besides language, it is very important to find some common signs or learn the foreign signs. Otherwise it can happen, that you are even not able to order food or drinks.

The following picture shows how Chinese people count to 9 (10) with just on hand. The 10 can also be shown by only using one hand, if u cross your middle finger over your index finger.



Competition in car manufacturing?

(15.07.2019 at BYD)

BYD Company Limited is originally a rechargeable battery producer in China, which has entered the automobile market as well. We were visiting them on 15 of July 2019. We did not see anything of the company except the show room and their demonstration model of their sky rail. BYD is very well known as a battery producer, but I did not expect BYD as a highly accepted car manufacturer in china until I realized that actually there were quite a lot of their cars on the road. Even though Chinese people tend to like European cars, one could really recognize the huge number of cars from BYD. The following picture shows a part of the show room with some of the latest electric cars, designed by BYD.



In the showroom of BYD we saw some new models, which often looked like a mixture of Audi (VW), BMW and Ford. Which made sense as they told us, that they had a designer which used to work for Audi. So, why don't we see the cars of BYD on European roads?

Actually, we were told that BYD does currently not fulfil the safety requirements for the European car market. Since there are some very well-established car manufacturers in the European market and driving a car means having trust in the manufacturer, I would probably tend to say that it would be very hard for BYD to enter the European market, if they want to. On the other hand, there are already a lot of suppliers in China which produce e.g. for VW and there are car manufacturers from Asia (e.g. Hyundai) which operate successful in the European market by now. Considering these examples and the fast development of China, companies in almost every branch in Europe and should be aware that there is a huge potential of competition from China, but that there is also a huge potential of partnerships.

Factory workers

(15.07.2019 EF Eugster / Frismag)

On the very first days of our company visits in China we could obtain some similarities to the books we have read. Eugster / Frismag for example has a lot of co-workers. They are far away from home and do not just work but also live at the company until they leave for good to go back home on the country side to marry. This was not the last connectedness to the books. The Swiss workers also told us, that even though the Chinese workers have legally a 40-hours week, they would not stay at the company, if they could not work overtime. The main reason for the Chinese employees in this factory was to earn a lot of money in a limited time. And since their friends and family are far away, they had no reason to gain for much leisure time. Officially there are 36 hours overtime allowed per year. In fact, the workers in this example work 20 hours overtime per week.

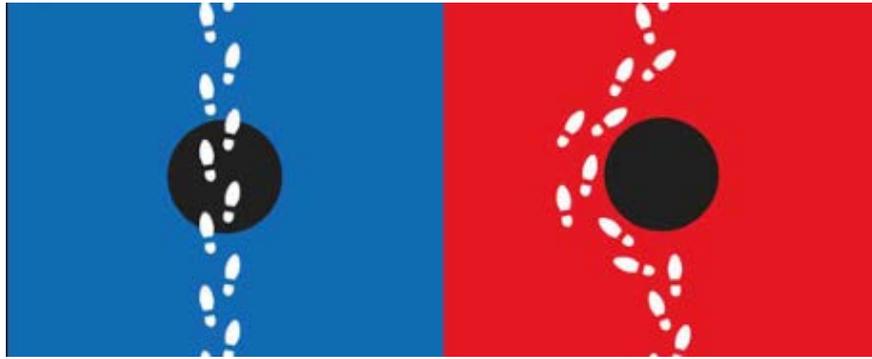
“mei wenti”

(17.07.2019 at Hogward Swisspur)

In one of our seminars we were told, that if a customer asks a Chinese supplier if he can produce something, the supplier would never say “no”. The Chinese suppliers usually answer with “yes” or “no problem” (which is called “mei wenti” in Chinese), whether they can deliver or not. This setting or behaviour can be recognized during doing business and in private context.

If you gave an order to Chinese suppliers and you are not sure about the capabilities of your supplier, it is possible that he cannot fulfil your requirements by itself. So, your supplier will probably ask other Chinese companies for help and suddenly there are third-party companies involved in producing parts of your products without your knowledge. In fact, this is just a way of problem solving and communication, we are not used to. In Switzerland the supplier would not have accepted an order he could not manage. Or if he cannot produce the parts by now, he would figure out how to produce them instead of just giving them to another supplier.

The pictures on the next side captures the handling of problems. The typically way how western society handles problems, is to try to solve the, which is shown on the left (blue) side of the picture. Instead of trying to solve a problem, it is very common to avoid a problem in Asia (which should not be confused with prevention), which is represented on the right side of the picture.



This kind of problem-handling cannot only be found in business context but can occur everywhere. One day our group went to a hotel. The rooms were acceptable and had everything needed. Right at the beginning the staff at the reception desk told us, that if some of the rooms smelled strange, we could change to another room. Therefore, they did not prevent the problem, but let it just happen and afterwards tried to avoid it. We entered the first room, the smell was quite unpleasant, but we thought it would become less strong, if we would turn on the air conditioning. Later we recognised that the air conditioning did not work, so we changed the rooms (which was not easy since the staff did not speak English). The next morning, we noticed that the toilet flush was not working, so we changed the room again. In the third room everything was working. This example does not only show, that the Chinese people avoided the problem and did not solve it by repairing the things, but it also shows, that trial and error can lead to the right decision too. Sometimes this can even be the faster and easier way to deal with a problem, instead of first trying to find out how one can repair/ solve the problem.

Individualism vs. communitarianism

(23.07.2019 at GSS)

In China, relationships often have priority over tasks. Therefore, it is very important to learn to know your business partners well to build up a trustworthy basis. Furthermore, China is known as being a country with more focus on communitarianism than individualism, but never the less there is a change in mindset. Some stories in the recommended books were telling about older people, which did not like to speak about their own stories. They did not consider their own experience and stories as important among so much other stories, whilst younger people suffer to tell about themselves.

The picture above shows a message which is written above the entrance to the quality control area at Global Sourcing Services AG Shanghai. At GSS we were told that China is now lacking for people in some areas, which first sounded ridiculous to some of us. But then the employee continued. He told us, that is hard to find people with an understanding for quality and since GSS produces quality they are dependent of that kind of people. They said us, that older people are not in the habit of paying attention to quality. One sort of a heavy black bicycle and one sort of an ugly black car fitted everybody in the earlier days. Younger people nowadays are searching for quality. They like expensive bags and luxury cars and they think their life matters. Therefore, they want to go to university. Here you can see a shift from communitarianism to communitarianism with a bit of individualism.

This change represents a challenge for GSS. The older people do not have the sense for quality. The younger ones do have this sense, but you will not find them on the assembly line. So, GSS has to make their workers believe, that their work matters and that they therefor have to look for quality. Also, they have to learn them, that they will not be punished, if they show, where failures happen.

Governmental decisions

(24.07.2019 at Sonova and another day)

The western media show us every now and then the supposedly bad or poor actions and decisions made by different governments. Mostly this so-called news seems to be independent from the country they are reporting from. Yet many of us are aware that considering the news the only truth is not an option. In the time of fake-news, we tend to distrust the media and sometimes even believe the opposite they report could be the truth. But many western people agree on one thing media is telling us, that the government in Asia is deciding too much without asking about the opinion of the people. On the other hand, we often do not know, if we should agree with our own governmental system.

I wanted to talk about government in China with a Chinese person directly, but I did not know how to start that them. Luckily, a Chinese woman asked me about government in Switzerland and I remembered some fellow students, which told me about their opinion of governmental decision making in Switzerland. They told me that they really appreciate that they can participate in a lot of decisions and that therefore the people can see that the voice of everybody is important for the community. I told the Chinese woman, that decisions in Switzerland are made by the people and that every adult can join the voting. After that information she asked me, if it does not take a long time until decisions are made and if that process is economically efficient. Her question focused exactly the complaining I had heard of. I said, that friends of mine from Switzerland had reported, that construction projects were cancelled or postponed because there were complaints which have to be processed first.

During our journey we were wondering a lot about the speed of building and the amount of buildings which were raised up in China throughout the last years. Comparing the enormous speed in constructing skyscrapers or other building in China with projects in Germany or other European countries, it cannot be ruled out, that the shared decision making has some negative impact on the speed.

The women noted, that if this democratic handling of decisions even affects the speed in small countries like Switzerland, she wondered if a huge country like China was even able to come to a decision this way.

Safety or supervision? Point of view

(29.07.2019 Return flight)

When I was flying back to Switzerland, a Chinese woman was sitting beside me. A few weeks ago, I read in some articles about china, that almost 80% of all Chinese people associate tattoos with criminality. Since I have quite a lot of tattoos and used handkerchiefs in the airplane (in china you blow your nose on the toilet), I thought she would not feel very comfortable besides me. We did not talk for the whole flight, but when the pilot announced the landing, she suddenly started to talk to me. She was an English teacher in her late 30s and flew to London with her daughter and her daughters' friend. I noticed that she was very interested in me and my experience in the western countries, because she had never been to Europe or the United States before. Even though she was not used to these cultures, she did not mind my tattoos, asked for my WeChat account and even invited me and my boyfriend (whom she does not know) to visit her in china and stay with her family. I realized again, that preparing for a visit in

a foreign country is important, but one can easily mix up generalization, which means a tendency of cultural values in a group, with stereotypes, which is a blind application of a generalization to every person of a cultural group.

The second thing this woman taught me on the side was that again and again one tends to see things first (and sometimes only) through one's own eyes. This happened while she asked me, if London, Switzerland, Germany and other cities and countries were safe. I was about to say yes, but then I tried it the other way and told her, how I would behave in some cities. In most of the cities I would not go out by my own late at night and on a lot of crowded places I take special care for my belongings. We found out, that a lot of locations in Europe aren't "safe" compared to Shanghai or Shenzhen and for people, who aren't used to cities which are not observed, this could be frightening.

One might think, that Chinese people just don't know that they are monitored, things are censored and that there are alternatives to that. What can be easily forgotten, is there are also Chinese people, that know about the alternatives, but rather choose safety before "greater freedom".

Conclusion

The short stories disclose some experiences and discussions which had impact on me and lead to something like a change in mind. What they have in common, is that at first glance we seem to understand most of the context and do rapidly build decisions on this point of view, but in fact we do not recognise or even understand most of it and therefore our impressions and our opinions are just a few among many and may probably not be one of the best ones.

What has to be added is that one might have expectations which will not be fulfilled, because of a lack of time or just because of unforeseeable incidents. E.g. if you have planned a company visit and another person, which is more important to the company than you are, suddenly wants to visit the company on the same date, it is possible that your visit will be cancelled without reasonable explanation. There is almost no time for personal trips or visits during the program. One might think that therefore it is hard to learn much about the culture if you do not add a personal trip afterwards, but companies and working behaviour is also a very important part of the Chinese culture, which is hard to experience on your own. Everybody of us can make a trip to China to see the nightlife of Shanghai. Which is for sure worth it, but the China module is quite a unique possibility to learn to know the work and business life of China and Chinese people.